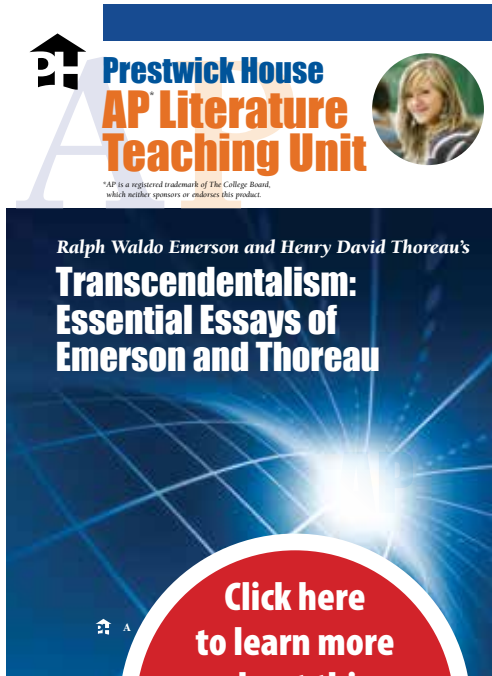




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Teaching Unit

**Transcendentalism:
Essential Essays of Emerson and Thoreau**

by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau



Prestwick House

Item No. 303291

Transcendentalism

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. analyze the significance of the included essays within the context of Transcendental philosophy.
2. trace the development of the themes found in the essays, including:
 - independence and individuality
 - the role of Nature
 - the primacy of the individual conscience.
3. explain how the authors' backgrounds emerge in the themes of their essays.
4. analyze the ways in which tone and diction contribute to the meaning of the essays.
5. analyze the ways in which syntax lends itself to tone construction.
6. explain how biblical, classical, and historical allusions contribute to the overall meanings of the essays.
7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. respond to free-response items similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. offer a close reading of selected Transcendentalist essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Lecture Notes

WHAT IS TRANSCENDENTALISM?

In the 150+ years since Waldo Emerson (as he preferred to be called) published his essay, “The Transcendentalist,” there have been almost as many definitions and explanations of Transcendentalism as there have been people offering those definitions and explanations. Indeed, part of the strength and weakness of the Transcendental Movement and the system of thought it engendered is that there is no one “creed,” no one set of beliefs—philosophical, spiritual, or ethical—that all Transcendentalists embraced.

Part of the goal of the Transcendentalists was to rethink theories of how the mind perceived and understood the world, the Divine, and itself. The prevailing thought of the day taught that such Truth existed outside of the mind and could be learned only through experience and reason. The Transcendentalists—like their European literary counterparts, the Romantics—believed that Truth lay within each individual and could be known intuitively.

Indeed, the very emphasis of Transcendentalism on the Individual and the Individual’s ability to discern Truth would make any attempt to codify it into a simple nutshell statement an oxymoron. In “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson defined Transcendentalism as “Idealism as it appears in 1842.” This “idealism” was a call to individuals to turn their backs on the materialistic, industrial, and corporate aspects of the world and to explore the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. In exploring these aspects, however, the individual was further called upon to reject the ideas of the past: old doctrines and dogmas that had, in the opinion of the Transcendentalists, been the cause of war and oppression. Rather, the individual was to examine his or her own innermost being and arrive at his or her own intuitive knowledge of truth. So adamant were Emerson and Thoreau that each individual must intuit his or her own truth, that neither desired “followers” or “disciples.” Both admonished their would-be disciples to find their *own* way rather than imitate the beliefs and lives of the authors. Each must follow his or her own instincts and not conform to the dictates of society. Although society would always attempt to influence the individual toward conformity, the individual must always struggle to remain true to his or her self and to his or her identity.

Ironically, however, it was Transcendentalism’s emphasis on individual thought and effort that doomed it as a fleeting movement never to be institutionalized. Still, it was enormously influential in defining what it would mean to be an intellectual in America in the following centuries.

The principles of transcendentalism were, in fact, so individual—and its sources so varied—the philosophies of Plato, Emanuel Swedenbourg, and the German Romantics—that the philosophy was condemned by critics as ill-defined and unknowable.

Transcendentalism

Self-Reliance (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

1. Why does Emerson begin this essay by asserting, “The sentiment [the original verses he encountered] instil is of more value than any thought they may contain”?

2. What, according to Emerson, is genius?

3. What point does Emerson make by alluding to Moses, Plato, and Milton?

4. What is it that makes any great work of art great?

5. What have been Emerson’s methods of development in the first paragraph of this essay?

6. What does Emerson mean when he says, “imitation is suicide”?

Friendship (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

1. What is the essence of the prevailing simile in the second paragraph of this essay?

2. What, according to Emerson, is friendship?

3. How, according to Emerson, does one’s friendship affect how one regards his or her friend?

4. What is the strength of friendship that allows Emerson to write, “When they are real, they are not glass threads or frost-work, but the solidest thing we know”?

5. In what way is a would-be friend like an Olympian?

The Village

1. What does Thoreau say in this chapter that suggests that he is not the hermit and the misanthrope he is often accused of being?

2. In what way does Concord resemble a prairie-dog colony?

3. What famous event in Thoreau's life does he allude to at the end of this essay? Why does he save this episode for the end?
